

Get Wild: Wild spring up high

Frances Hartogh



A bald eagle stands on a tree near the Blue River in Summit County on Sunday, April 7, 2024. With signs of spring popping up across the High Country, many animals are becoming more active in the region.

Glenn Schutz/Courtesy photo

Spring in the High Country is unpredictable. Last week's weather felt like full-on winter, but green grass is peeking through the snow and the birds are singing lustily this week.

Spring has officially been with us for three weeks. It began when the Earth's equator aligned directly with the Sun on the vernal equinox, which occurred this year on March 19 at 9:06 p.m.

Speaking of birds, spring in the High Country is an exciting time for birdwatching. Deciduous trees and shrubs haven't leafed out, and many of our local birds are calling for mates and protecting their territories, which makes them easier to spot than usual.

Female mountain chickadees favor loud males. It's hard to miss their hoarse "chick-a-zee-zee-zee." They'll be building nests soon and laying eggs in early May.

Male pine grosbeaks, the largest members of the finch family, are unmistakable with their bright red plumage and black-and-white wing bars. And after dusk in April, the soft trill of the usually silent Boreal owl can often be heard.

Every spring, [upwards of 100 million birds migrate to and through the Rocky Mountains](#). Some are heading to their nesting sites farther north while others are returning to their breeding grounds here in Summit County. Look for the return of some of our more colorful migratory avian friends, like western tanager and lazuli buntings.

Many migratory birds travel thousands of miles, often at night. Let's make their journeys safer by dimming artificial lights and not using more light than necessary since artificial lighting disrupts birds' ability to navigate, causing disorientation and exhaustion, and tragically resulting in collisions with human-built structures. It's timely, too, to reapply bird-safe stickers to home windows to avoid unnecessary crashes.

What are our four-legged wild neighbors up to in spring?

[Black bears are emerging from their dens](#), sometimes with cubs that were born a few months earlier. After being in a state of torpor for four to five months, black bears are ravenous. With noses 100 times more sensitive than ours, they can smell food from up to 5 miles. So, secure any food sources — including garbage, dirty barbecues, and bird feeders — from bears. Remember, "a fed bear is a dead bear."

Female deer, elk, bighorn sheep, moose and other [ungulates](#) will give birth soon, usually in May or early June, while a few have already given birth. Be

sure to give these creatures lots of space. Keep your dog on a hand-held leash during these sensitive times — for their safety and that of you and your pup. And don't forget that dogs must always be leashed in our wilderness areas.

Speaking of baby wildlife, Colorado Parks and Wildlife cautions that mothers will often leave young while foraging, and it is important to leave these little ones alone — and remain at a distance. Baby mammals have no scent, which protects them from predators. A human touch can impart a scent that their parent won't recognize, often resulting in abandonment. If concerned that a baby animal appears abandoned for over 24 hours, you may

call [any Colorado Parks and Wildlife office](#)

Spring brings notable changes in appearance for some High Country wildlife. Snowshoe hares, ptarmigan, and ermine start to exchange their white coloring, which provided important camouflage in our snowy winters, for brown, gray, or reddish coloring that blends in with bare earth and rocks.



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Frances Hartogh/Courtesy photo

It's good to be in the high country in the spring! Some people bemoan the advent of "mud season" and partake in their own migrations to warmer and drier climes. We who remain rejoice in sharing this special time with our wildlife neighbors.

"Get Wild" publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Frances Hartogh is a volunteer wilderness ranger for the Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit counties. For more information, visit EagleSummitWilderness.org.